

Education Freedom Requires Assessment Choice

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Key Points

- The benefits of school choice are constrained by narrow standardized testing options, which influence curriculum and teaching approaches.
- Testing choice will relieve educators of the burden of teaching to tests that do not meet their diverse approaches.
- State policymakers should provide for a diverse suite of testing choices at the K-12 and college entrance levels.

Education choice is growing exponentially. In 1996, 10,000 K-12 students participated in school choice programs. That number increased by over half a million in 23 years to 540,545 students in 2019. In the past five years, that number *again* increased by roughly half a million.¹

This is just the beginning. A January 2024 survey found that 72 percent of parents had considered a new school for their children in the past year.² And in 2025, Texas and Tennessee are poised to become the next states to enact education savings account (ESA) programs, potentially giving millions more students the education options that their parents want for them.³

As a result, alternatives to traditional public education are booming. From 2010 to 2021, the number of charter schools increased by 2,500, while the number of public schools decreased by 2,100. Public charter school enrollment skyrocketed over that time from 1.8 million to 3.7 million students.⁴ And the number of students residing in states that have enacted ESAs now stands at nearly 22 million.⁵

But despite these heartening numbers, school choice can never be complete without also implementing

testing choice. If schools are forced to administer rigid testing regimes and college-bound students must funnel through the same admissions test, families may be left with a menu of education locations that all must ultimately conform to the same standard.

Put another way, it matters less if students are learning at a Christian school, a classical school, or a public school if the same assessment or admissions exam measures them. As David Coleman, the CEO of College Board, which makes the SAT, put it, “Teachers will teach towards the test. There is no force on this earth strong enough to prevent that.”⁶

Testing Monopolies Restrict Education Freedom

Coleman wasn’t expressing his opinion, but reality. A synthesis of 49 studies found that educators and administrators change curriculum in response to high-stakes testing.⁷ And another study of school districts found teachers used more test-like problems and narrowed their instruction’s focus in response to standardized tests.⁸ While these studies focus on the burden

of testing on public schools, some states have pushed the same burden onto private schools through school choice programs.

In Wisconsin, for example, students participating in the state's private school choice programs are forced to take the state-made Wisconsin Forward Exam tests.⁹ Those exams use federal Common Core standards for public school students, not the standards of the parents' chosen private school.

Similarly, in Texas, heated negotiations over an ESA proposal in 2023 almost resulted in a bill to require private schools to use the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness or a test directly linked to those assessments.¹⁰ If it had been enacted, Texas's private schools would have had to mirror public schools' academic priorities.

The same principle applies to college admissions exams, which are increasingly also used to assess high school students.

In Oklahoma, the state government measures the success of its entire public education system by ACT scores.¹¹ Additionally, state law requires students to meet a certain ACT score—and only an ACT score—to qualify for state scholarships to Oklahoma public universities.¹²

In Wisconsin and North Carolina, students participating in each state's school choice program are forced to take the ACT in 11th grade. And in many states—including Alabama, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Carolina, West Virginia, and Wyoming—all public high school students must take the SAT or ACT to graduate.¹³

As a result, students, teachers, and administrators in these schools must devote the final years of high school catering to the ACT's or College Board's priorities rather than their own.

Unfortunately, these tests are also becoming increasingly biased and degraded.¹⁴

Consider the College Board, which has lowered standards on the SAT over time. Previously, students were required to answer multiple questions interpreting passages of roughly 500–750 words. Now, as the test has aligned with Common Core standards, “students answer only a single question” based on maximally innocuous passages about “the length of a tweet.”¹⁵

It's no wonder professors at even the most elite universities report that their students are unable to read

a full book.¹⁶ If high schools know that their students do not need to be capable of reading literature in depth and will instead be tested on short bursts of attention given to inconsequential subject matter, then that is the standard to which they will teach. Just as Coleman predicted, teachers are teaching to the test.

That's not all. Between 2021 and 2022, the number of students earning the highest grade on the College Board's AP Literature exam spiked 240 percent even as reading scores nationally declined.¹⁷ And a 2024 study by University of Cincinnati researchers found a “a 71-point drop in the rigor of SAT math from 2008 to 2023”¹⁸—clear signs of watered-down standards.

As a result, students are being measured with biased tests and degraded standards that anticompetitive public policy protects.

Choice Is Better Than Bans

Some may be tempted to ban standardized testing altogether. But universities from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to Yale University to the University of Texas have experimented with test-optional admissions in recent years only to quickly reverse course. As the president of the University of Texas said, “Our experience during the test-optional period reinforced that standardized testing is a valuable tool for deciding who is admitted.”¹⁹

Instead, choice is needed. With testing choice, schools can either choose a test that fits their pedagogical style or allow students to choose from a number of tests, thus freeing teachers from the pressure to mold lesson plans to one assessment.

Of course, creating new testing alternatives is difficult. But it is not impossible. Already, the Classic Learning Test (CLT) has become a strong alternative to older college entrance exams and assessments for students grades three through 12.

The CLT exams, like other exams, are valid tests of literacy and numeracy. The company is nonetheless unique because it grounds its exams in classic works of literature, philosophy, and history. Providing a test that includes such rich content has proven valuable and validating to the growing population of families choosing classically inspired educational options. The test does not, however, require previous knowledge of these works. Instead, all students are expected to

demonstrate the ability to understand rich and consequential texts, a capability once expected of every educated person.

Proponents of testing monopolies may argue that the primary benefit of students taking a single, standardized test is that every school and student can be compared by the same measure.

While no two tests will ever be a perfect match, it is common practice to create scale alignments among different tests to allow for direct comparisons. For example, a psychometric study found a high correlation of 0.89 between CLT and SAT scores, meaning scores on one test can be reliably used to compare a test taker's ability in categorical subject areas.²⁰ Thus, while tests will make different judgments on what content to include, correlated scoring gives certainty that scores on each test will accurately assess test takers across the board.

Recommendations

The most effective way to advance testing choice is for states to provide all students and schools participating

in school choice programs with a menu of assessments and ensure that all admissions testing options are usable for public college admissions and scholarships. Several states have already advanced such reforms. Arkansas and Florida, for example, allow schools participating in their respective school choice programs to meet the program's assessment mandate through numerous different tests.²¹ Florida also gives students a list of testing options to meet high school graduation requirements and has a requirement that all public universities and colleges in the state accept the CLT alongside the ACT and SAT.²²

School choice rests on the conviction that students shouldn't be stuck in a school simply because of artificially drawn district lines. Its success is built on the truth that competition breeds improvement. But to make that competition real, we must also liberate students from the testing monopolies that constrain education diversity. Only then will we truly have education freedom.

About the Author

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Notes

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